

**Presentation of
Gary Ruskin, Executive Director of Commercial Alert
to the World Health Organization
Conference on Health Marketing and Youth
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on
Why Turning Off the Television is Not Enough**

My name is Gary Ruskin. I am the executive director of Commercial Alert, which is a non-profit organization based in the United States. Our mission is to keep the commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children or subverting the higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy.

The World Health Organization has invited us to discuss an old subject: commercial influences on children and teenagers.

Corporations have captured children's attention and imagination for many decades. Take Ralph Nader, for example. He and I founded Commercial Alert together. Back in 1939, when Ralph was four years old, his parents took him to the world's fair in New York City. There he saw the General Motors exhibit on the so-called "cars of the future." Little Ralph was amazed. After viewing the exhibit, he was so excited that he yelled out to his parents "look, GM, GM, GM." So GM was able to captivate even little Ralph Nader at age four – over sixty years ago.

I'm going to do two things in this talk today. First, I will briefly describe what has changed about marketing to youth since little Ralph went to the General Motors exhibit more than sixty years ago. Then I'll make an argument for why governments and multinational institutions like the World Health Organization must protect children from the harms of commercial marketing.

I'll go through this in greater detail later, but the core of the argument is that corporate marketing harms or kills countless millions of youth across the planet. It has grown too potent, too sophisticated, too intrusive, too omnipresent, too dangerous, and too far out of the control of parents & relatives. It is the proper role of government to restore to parents, relatives & those who love children control over the commercial influences that shape their lives.

In what follows, I'm mostly going to discuss commercial influences on children in the United States. That's for two reasons. First, I'm an American, and it's what I know best. But more importantly, because there is more marketing to children in the U.S. than in many other places, and because of the spreading of marketing to children throughout the globe, American children are a vision of the future, a vision of what may happen to children in other countries, in years to come.

Across the planet, marketing to youth is growing more and more intensive, because it can be hugely profitable. Advertisers are increasingly aggressive in their efforts to place ads everywhere that children & adolescents are. They engulf children with ads. Here's how one

market researcher explained what they do: "Imagine a child sitting in the middle of a large circle of train tracks. Tracks, like the tentacles of an octopus, radiate to the child from the outside circle of tracks. The child can be reached from every angle. This is how the [corporate] marketing world is connected to the child's world."

Advertisers spend countless billions of dollars each year assaulting children with their messages from every angle they can use. They deploy ads on television, through product placement on tv and in movies and on videos and in video games, on the Internet, via email, via direct mail, on billboards, on clothing, via buzz marketing, on the radio, through point-of-purchase ads, in magazines, in movie theaters, via so-called "place-based" ads, via licensing of popular characters in children's television and movies, on the packages of many products, among many other ways.

Especially notable in recent years is the growing use of school for marketing purposes. In the United States, we have compulsory education laws that force children to attend school. Advertisers such as Primedia's Channel One, Coca-Cola and Pepsi have conscripted these laws and the schools to market junk food, fast food, and high-calorie soda pop to students. Incredibly, Primedia's Channel One has harnessed the compulsory school laws to force eight million children to watch two minutes of ads each school day, including ads for junk food, soda pop and violent movies.

Advertisers use many techniques to sell to youth. Mostly these involve manipulating their needs during the stages of their growth into adulthood. Some of the more common needs that advertisers take advantage of to sell products include youth needs for peer acceptance, love, safety, desire to feel powerful or independent, aspirations to be and to act older than they actually are, and the need to have an identity. Much of the child-targeted advertising is painstakingly researched and prepared, at times by some of the most talented and creative minds on the planet. Ad agencies retain people with doctorates in marketing, psychology and even child psychology for the purposes of marketing to youth.

Advertisers are so successful at marketing to youth that they sometimes discuss it in terms of the battle over what they chillingly call "mind share." Some advertisers even openly discuss "owning" children's minds. For example, Mike Searles, then-president of Kids-R-U's, a major children's clothing store, explained "[I]f you own this child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come. Companies are saying, 'Hey, I want to own the kid younger and younger.'"

In sum, corporations and their advertising agencies have succeeded in setting up their own authority structures to deliver commercial messages almost everywhere that children go. Among other things, this is a massive social engineering project that shifts authority over youth away from parents, relatives and communities and transfers it to large corporations and their advertising agencies. As such, it undermines some traditional views of parenting and the proper role of parents and relatives as the chief guardians and authorities over their children. We wouldn't be here discussing marketing to children today if most commercial messages were healthy. They aren't. Corporations aggressively market to children a great variety of products,

including tobacco, alcohol, junk food, fast food, pornography, gambling and violent entertainment. So doing, they have created, through great effort and expense, a toxic commercial culture that is purposefully damaging to children. It is perhaps the first time in human history that adults have turned on their children and created a culture which harms not nurtures them.

Large multinational corporations and their advertising agencies produce and promote this culture. This corporate-made culture has taken root most strongly in the United States and parts of Europe, and is quickly spreading elsewhere. It has shoved aside local cultures, local values, and old ways of teaching health to youth.

Not surprisingly, in the United States we see alarming and often rising levels of what should be called "diseases of affluence" or "corporate-related illness" among youth, such as alcohol-related morbidity and mortality, tobacco-related morbidity and mortality, childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes, violence and violent crime, and gambling addiction.

Here's a sketch of the problem in the United States. Each day, about 3,000 American children will start to smoke, and about a third of them will have their lives cut short due to tobacco-related illness. Thirteen percent of children aged 6 to 11 years and 14% of adolescents aged 12 to 19 years were overweight in 1999. This prevalence has nearly tripled for adolescents in the past 2 decades, according to the U.S. Surgeon General. Type 2 diabetes -- which used to be an adult disease -- is increasingly diagnosed in children as young as 10. Alcohol is a contributing factor in the four leading causes of death among persons ages 10 to 24: (1) motor-vehicle crashes, (2) unintentional injuries, (3) homicide, and (4) suicide. And a recent study by Jeffrey Johnson of Columbia University found that adolescents who watched one or more hours of TV per day were four times more prone to subsequent violent acts, including violent crime, than those who watched less than one hour of TV per day.

In the United States, some youth are more heavily targeted with advertising than others. For example, there is more marketing to minority youth. The pages of Advertising Age are stuffed with articles about how advertisers specially target African-American and Latino youth, many of whom are reside in low income communities. And, again not surprisingly, in general the health status of children in impoverished minority communities is much worse than in affluent white communities.

Now I've talked a little about the health effects of marketing to children. Perhaps equally serious is the effects of advertising on children's values, especially the promotion of materialism. In the United States, since 1966 researchers at University of California at Los Angeles have been polling incoming first-year university students in the United States on a broad range of issues. They have found a large drop in the percent who valued developing a "meaningful philosophy of life" as a goal, while there have been increases in the percentage of those students who say that "to be very well off financially" is an essential goal. Of course, these are complex phenomena that cannot be ascribed to any single cause, whether it is the commercial culture, or anything else.

But the corporate-related sickness among many of America's children presents us with a vision of the future of children around the world as it could be -- unless we loosen the grip that advertisers have on the minds of our youth, and stop the dismantling of local cultures, values and traditions.

Unless we stop it, multinational corporations and the advertising industry will keep turning more and more of the world's youth into a bunch of smoking, drinking, gambling, materialistic, obese, diabetic, violence-loving addicts.

Globalization will likely bring about these "diseases of affluence" or "corporate-related illness" among more and more children and adolescents throughout the planet. In part, that is because international trade agreements such as the NAFTA and GATT subordinate worthy concerns such as child health to the demands of trade.

As if that's not bad enough, four other trends suggest that these child health problems will worsen: 1) the growth of corporate power in general and of corporate control over entire countries and their governments as well as multinational institutions such as the World Trade Organization. 2) The unceasing development and deployment of increasingly psychologically sophisticated -- and therefore more potent -- commercial messages directed at children. 3) The ability of corporations to penetrate into nearly every nook and cranny of children's lives, and, 4) The collapse of the notion that children are somehow sacred, should not be for sale, nor subject to commercialization and commodification.

Enough of the bad news. Now I want to sketch out some of the solutions to the harms caused by marketing to children.

With all this marketing artillery targeting children from so many directions, parents simply cannot keep all of these influences away from their kids, even if they tried to do so full-time. They just can't shut it out.

You can think of advertising to youth as a kind of pollution. Of course, parents should do what they can to shield their children and teenagers from this commercial pollution. So that means, of course, that children should watch as little television as possible. But turning off the television, and other parental interventions cannot possibly solve the problem of marketing to children, if only because parents can only cut off some of the flow of some of the toxic commercial influences on their children.

So that's where the legitimate role of government and multinational institutions like the World Health Organization come in: to stop the commercial pollution, and to restore to parents, relatives and communities some control over the commercial influences over their children's lives.

Some in this audience advocate for the politically and commercially convenient solution of

having governments pay advertising agencies to develop counter-advertising. The counter-ads would be placed on television to market the notion of health to our young people. I think we should be wary about this approach for two reasons. First, most advertising is a form of propaganda. That is to say, it is a type of magic. Ultimately, if we are concerned that advertising magic holds too great a sway over youth, then we should teach children how to reason and analyze and see through the tricks in advertising, rather than merely to counter-propagandize about health. Developing the capacity to reason is the best way to disarm the power of unhealthy commercial influences over youth. Investing in education is much more effective and productive over the long-term than spending millions for a politically convenient and commercially profitable effort at propagandizing at them even more.

There is a second reason, too, to be wary of counter-advertising: it does not begin to eliminate the cause of the problem. The problem is corporations and their conduct. We must deal with the problem of marketing to youth directly at its source. Anything less is cowardice. It is merely treating symptoms rather than the cause. It would be shameful to be so cowardly when the stakes are so high.

We have to quit blaming parents for failing to keep the toxic commercial culture out of their kids lives. This is blaming the victim. Every parent on the planet could doubtless do better at shielding their own kids, but at base it is not their fault. Instead, we must build cultures that nourish children, not harm them. That will necessarily involve at least four things: (1) placing limits on corporate marketing to youth, (2) empowering parents and relatives with respect to corporations, (3) holding corporations accountable for the damage they do to youth, both in legislatures and courts of law, and (4) carving out the marketing and sale of harmful products to children from international trade agreements, and establishing the supremacy of child health concerns over mercantile imperatives in these trade agreements.

This won't be easy. We ask our friends at the World Health Organization to be mindful that as we strive to eradicate the diseases of poverty, not to shy away from these difficult political and public health battles necessary to safeguard children from the rise of the diseases of affluence, or corporate-related disease, among children and adolescents.

We also must answer the question: who should have the power to decide what is healthy for youth. Should self-interested corporations decide, or should it be those around youth that love them: parents, family, neighbors and communities. I think most would agree that parents and relatives should decide, not distant, profit-hungry corporations.

There has been some good news recently at the international level on this front. The World Health Organization has shown excellent leadership in developing the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. This is a very important, ground-breaking effort to shield children from the effects of commercial marketing.

But it must only be the beginning.

Because the problem of marketing to children is so large, there is an important role for everyone in this room in reducing the damage of commercial influences on youth. Many different kinds of organizations, from small non-governmental organizations to the World Health Organization, have something to contribute to this.

Because the problem is so large, we need to work together to protect children from harmful commercial influences, and hold corporations accountable for the damage they do to children and teenagers. Personally, I look forward to working with all of you to accomplish this.

At Commercial Alert, we have plenty of hope about the prospects for working together to protect children from the harms of commercial advertising. There's good reason for this: in the United States, we have built very broad coalitions – from conservatives to centrists to progressives – in support of protecting children from commercial exploitation. We have been very successful so far, and others in this room have had successes too. We hope to cross these and many other boundaries, of race, class, region and nationality, to work with you to make sure that our youth are not for sale, nor merely pawns in some grandiose corporate marketing plan.

Again, I am hopeful, because I believe that in spite of the tremendous power of corporations, and the advertising industry, and the toxic commercial culture they have built, that in the long run, together we will find the political will to defend the children. And we must.

Thank you.